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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 002298

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/11/2034
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PROP](#) [SCUL](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: INTERNET USERS PUSH AGAINST CONTROLS, CONTACTS
TELL S/P DIRECTOR SLAUGHTER

REF: BEIJING 1531

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.
4 (b/d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Despite tight political controls, China's netizens are increasingly using the Internet as a forum for public discussion and even, at times, as a platform to challenge actions by government authorities, Chinese electronic media professionals told State Department Policy Planning Director Anne-Marie Slaughter. Interaction between meeting participants underscored the pressures on traditional Communist Party media outlets as a result of commercialization, as well as the fissures and tensions between official media and leading-edge Internet organizations. End Summary.

Growing Power of the Internet

¶2. (C) Representatives from several media organizations met with State Department Policy Planning Director Anne-Marie Slaughter on May 31 to discuss the role of the Internet in China, including blogging and recent Internet innovations such as Facebook and Twitter. The PRC participants were Mei Jingsong (protect), Director of the Information Center of the popular commercial news portal Sina.com; He Jian (protect), Director of "QQ," a major Internet portal based in Guangzhou that includes blogging and instant messaging as well as more traditional news and information; and Tian Wei (protect), an anchor on China's English-language television channel CCTV-9. Concern over political reprisals kept Senior international correspondent for the commercial news portal Netease Wu Nan (protect) from attending (see para 12 below). The journalists told Director Slaughter that the Internet had increasingly become a forum for the exchange of ideas and the discussion of issues in China even in the face of strictures imposed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Blogs Are Hot...

¶3. (C) Blogging in particular was an important medium for exchanging ideas and expressing diverse viewpoints, the group said, but the use of blogs to generate public discussion was just beginning. Sina.com's Mei Jingsong said that blogs were picked up by news portals and other Internet platforms and widely circulated and that some bloggers had become quite influential. CCTV-9's Tian Wei said that the response of bloggers to visits to China this year by Secretary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Geithner indicated that netizens were beginning to revisit blogs to ask new questions and generate discussion on an array of issues. The May 31-June 2 visit of Secretary Geithner, Tian said, had prompted an Internet discussion of China-U.S. relations. She noted that netizen response to her own blog on Secretary Clinton's February

visit had sparked conversation on a range of issues that continued to percolate as people revisited the blog several months later. Tian's blog had also prompted a reassessment of Secretary Clinton's personal style and China policy. Tian said she had initially cautioned against overly optimistic expectations regarding the visit. Chinese television coverage had shattered Chinese stereotypes of the Secretary as a stern, hard-line official. The image of Secretary Clinton that emerged in the extensive discussion of her in the blogosphere was of a thoughtful, engaging diplomat who would be good for U.S.-China relations, Tian said.

14. (C) While the meeting participants were reluctant to conclude that blogging or other Internet platforms were having an impact on central policy, they pointed to a number of examples of changes in local government decisions as a result of pressure from angry netizens expressing their views via blogs and news portals. QQ's He Jian mentioned the case in Xiamen in late 2007 when a "walking protest" by local residents had stopped the construction of a petrochemical plant. Local authorities had ordered media not to report on the plant construction, but they could not stop the flow of information on the Internet, which in turn led to the protest. Sina.com's Mei mentioned a 2004 case in Heilongjiang Province when local authorities had imposed harsher penalties on a BMW owner who had hit and killed a child after more than 200,000 comments were posted on Sina.com protesting the original sentence. CCTV's Tian pointed to recent webchats with the public by Party chief Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao as an indication that top leaders were trying to turn the power of the Internet to their advantage.

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... But Tweets Are Cool

15. (C) Although blogging has taken hold rapidly as a major Internet tool in China, other recent Internet innovations, such as "Facebook" or the microblogging format "Twitter," have not achieved the same popularity or social function. The journalists said that Chinese netizens tended to use the English-language version of Facebook and that they used it primarily for games and fantasy play, not as a tool for social networking as in the United States. QQ's He Jian observed that text messages and Bulletin Boards remained the main medium for social organizing. (Note: The potential of Twitter as a medium of rapid communication has caught the attention of Chinese censors, who blocked twitter.com following the early-July Xinjiang riots. Many prominent bloggers have begun using Twitter, and, according to Embassy contacts, are employing technical means to get around the blocking software. PolOffs are able to access Fanfou, a Chinese version of Twitter, from Beijing, but censors selectively remove postings from the site.)

Sina.com

16. (C) Sina.com's Mei said that her portal had benefited from Yahoo's early experience. She was proud of Sina.com's reputation as one of the foremost examples of "new media" in China, especially for its news. The website summarized or re-posted thousands of newspaper articles from all of China's provinces, she noted, and maintained a very good relationship with traditional media. She said Chinese reporters searched Sina.com every day to find current stories, but noted that there were political limits to what the portal was allowed to do. Sina.com journalists did not write original news stories on sensitive issues, such as political or financial topics, but focused on editing stories from elsewhere. Sina.com had its own writers on entertainment and similar non-political areas and carried some foreign sources. Anyone could sign up to blog on Sina.com and did not need to use a true name, although they had to reveal it to Sina, Mei explained.

¶17. (C) CCTV's Tian Wei, in what appeared to be a response to He Jian and Mei Jingsong's implicit discrediting of official media, challenged the credibility and social responsibility of what she derisively referred to as "the new media," especially blogs. Managers of state-run media, especially CCTV, she asserted, took responsibility for media content but those who ran commercial news portals, much less blogging platforms, were not held to the same standards of accountability, she alleged. She declared that the web divided people rather than informing them, and allowed anyone who wished to do so to simply "vent," without presenting the other side of an issue. Tian was especially critical of what she called the "verbal violence" and "Internet mob" mentality that had crept into Chinese cyberspace and triggered actual violence against others by those inflamed by the Internet.

¶18. (C) Tian stated that state-run media were diversifying and that CCTV now offered the commercial websites a form of competition via its new webTV. She called for looking "at all types of media" before making snap judgments about the nature and quality of "new" vs "old" media in China.

Media Control: Ever-Present and Growing

¶19. (C) Asked to comment on the degree of Party control of the Internet in the past five years, Sina.com's Mei emphatically declared that controls were "tighter than ever." She acknowledged that Sina.com had recently removed the blog of controversial artist and blogger Ai Weiwei from the portal under orders from the Central Propaganda Department. Mei declined to comment on the specific reasons for the order, but said she received similar phone calls from the censors "all day every day." (Note: In addition to his politically provocative blogs, Ai has been compiling a database on the number of casualties from the May 2008 Sichuan earthquake and has been publicly urging victims to send him information. He was visited by security officers the night before his blog was removed from Sina after having attended a reception at the Embassy for Speaker Pelosi in late May 2009.)

¶10. (C) QQ's He Jian strongly concurred with Mei, adding that "big brother was here five years ago and big brother is still here today." Once such an order was given, He said, all other websites fell into line like a row of dominoes, and QQ

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had no choice but to remove all material by Ai. He said he had been compelled to move his own blog to different platforms several times in China, then to the U.S., then to Mongolia, to keep ahead of the censors. He said that the media had opened up during the earthquake period last year but had been shut down again since. However, the degree of control varied from place to place, depending in part on whether the propaganda authorities were central or local and on who the Party officials were, Mei and He said. QQ had more latitude or "space" than other provincial websites or those based in Beijing, He acknowledged, because Guangdong authorities were more tolerant. All of the journalists noted that the Party paid people to post comments on the Web to influence netizen opinion, the "fifty-cent" phenomenon. QQ's He said one can tell which posts were "fifty-centers" because, he claimed, they all originated in one place -- Ya'an, Sichuan.

¶11. (C) CCTV's Tian rejected these characterizations of "so-called media control," noting the growing diversity and expanding "space" for content of all media that in the past had not been allowed. She noted the bold reporting from Party-controlled southern papers, such as Southern Weekly and Southern Weekend, and the prominent, non-official Caijing (Finance) magazine.

¶12. (C) Wu Nan, senior international correspondent for the commercial news portal Netease, told PressOff shortly before the dinner that she would attend but called at the last minute to say she had checked with her superiors and was suddenly too busy to come. (Note: Netease had cancelled a webchat the previous week with House Speaker Pelosi following official direction that the Pelosi visit be covered via official Xinhua reports only, but Wu had moderated the webchat as planned by switching to a U.S.-based Internet host. For this reason, Wu may have felt she was already vulnerable and did not want to invite further censure by attending the dinner.)

Tensions Evident: Journalism's "Split Personality"

¶13. (C) The success of commercial media and the drive for greater professionalism in all media, CCTV-9's Tian acknowledged, had created a dilemma for mainstream official media. State-run media were still the "mouthpiece of the Party," she said, and took this responsibility seriously. At the same time, Party journalists wished to serve the public by providing education and information. As a result, she opined, official media had developed a "split personality." There was tension between the "mouthpiece" principle of the Party and journalistic notions of the public's "right to know." She said she respected the commercial Internet's sole purpose of pursuing profit and observed that Party journalists too "have to make a living" and conduct a "professional life." They could not criticize officialdom, she said, but they could push the envelope. They were treading a fine line and had to "look at the whole picture."

CCTV Goes Global, Maybe

¶14. (C) Tian said there was a major debate underway in CCTV over how to implement the Party leadership's recent instructions to Chinese media to "go global" and get closer to overseas audiences. Questions were being raised, she said, on whether Chinese journalists were well enough informed about the United States and other countries or whether they had the qualifications to carry out such a mandate. Some felt that China was not ready. Its journalists needed more exposure to the outside world and to non-Chinese media and more training in the skills and techniques of such Western news media as CNN and CNBC. Chinese media needed more professionalism. Tian contrasted this push for professionalism with the debates waged in CCTV in the 1990s over whether to use a traditional Xinhua format focused on the meetings and activities of state leaders or the personal interest approach taken by China News Service (Zhongguo Xinwen She), China's wire service for overseas Chinese. (Note: In August, CCTV for the second year in a row sent a group of senior editors to the U.S. for training at Columbia University. At CCTV's request, the Embassy arranged for the group to attend the August 6 State Department daily press briefing. In July, CCTV announced a major reorganization to optimize resources into one centralized news center across all CCTV channels.)

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